

Green Light for Red Planet Blues

Stan Nicholls talks to Kim Stanley Robinson

Trying to identify trends in science fiction can be foolhardy, because perceived fads have a habit of vanishing like Scotch mist. But one strand does seem currently fashionable – novels about Mars. Allen Steele, Ben Bova, Colin Greenland, Jack Williamson, Robert Forward, Mick Farren and Paul McAuley are among authors who have recently set books there.

Kim Stanley Robinson has gone one better and written a trilogy. Volume one, *Red Mars* (HarperCollins), covers the first forty years of Earth's attempt to colonize the red planet. Volumes two and three, *Green Mars* and *Blue Mars*, will take the story several centuries further.

Can Robinson account for this stream of Mars stories? "It's amazing, and I don't quite understand it. But I have the feeling we are just beginning to fully digest the impact of the Mariner and Viking missions. Now we know what Mars' surface really looks like, and it's an utterly astonishing, awesome, beautiful landscape. Okay, those missions were in 1976, so it seems like a slow reaction time, but I wonder if it doesn't take that long to absorb the impact of such information.

"When I started researching the trilogy, and saw the books of photos put out by the US government from the Viking mission, something just snapped. I thought, 'Wow!' I mean, I'm very attracted to polar regions, mountains and deserts, and here was an entire planet of them."

The trilogy, which Arthur C. Clarke told Robinson should be compulsory reading for future colonists, had a forerunner in the form of a novella, also called "Green Mars."

"I wrote that when I knew I was going to do the trilogy," Robinson explains, "and my intention was to write a short story simply to claim the title 'Green Mars.' It seemed to me it was a great title, and an obvious one, and with five hundred writers actively pumping out science fiction somebody was bound to use it. I wasn't going to get onto this project for another five years or so and I got paranoid about that.

"The funny thing is that when Clarke wrote to me he said, 'I would be calling

my current book *Green Mars* if you hadn't already taken the title.' So it wasn't pure paranoia; it had some basis in fact."

What lat behind his decision to tell the story over three volumes?

"I'd worked out the sort of macro-scale plot in my head and thought of it as a single novel, and I knew it was going to be a big one. I wanted it to be a big one. But the moment I got into working on it I realized it was going to be really hard to get the entire thing in one volume. I was worried whether I could afford to do things like spend seventy-five pages on the trip there, and that was cramping me. I discussed it with friends, my wife and my agent, and everybody more or less said, 'What's wrong with a trilogy?'"

"To tell you the truth I'd had a prejudice against the whole concept of the trilogy as a too commonly used device to stretch out a tale way beyond what it needs to be. But as soon as I got over that prejudice I was immediately relieved. I think of it now as a sort of Victorian three-decker; as one novel too long to fit into the covers of a single book."

Robinson was helped in his research by a group called The Mars Underground. "It's an informal association of American scientists, engineers and technical people who are fascinated by the Mars Project. They are principally interested in going there, and colonizing it in the very near future, and secondarily with the notion of terraforming it later on. They have a conference every year in Boulder, Colorado called The Case for Mars Conference, and a big conference book is published every year by the American Astronomical Society.

"They present papers to each other and discuss various technical problems, like the best Mars glove, or the best Mars helmet-to-body link-up. They get very arcane and technical because a lot of them are aerospace engineers and this is almost their work. If the US government was to put money into a Mars Project it might very well become their work.

"You call these people and say, 'I'm writing a science-fiction novel about

Mars and I'd really like to get it right, can you tell me about this and that?' And they just talk your ears off. They are fascinated about this notion of getting it right, because a lot of them have expressed dissatisfaction about science fiction not paying enough attention to the factual working-out of detailed astronomy and engineering."

The main point of conflict in *Red Mars* occurs between those colonists who want to terraform the planet and those who feel it is best left alone. The author himself is torn over the topic. "I feel an almost perfectly balanced ambivalence about this issue," Robinson says, "and it's one of the things that drew me to the project so strongly in the first place, and why I'm devoting five or six years of my life to it.

"There's a part of me that says terraforming Mars is a beautiful idea, almost a religious act; in that if we were ever able to walk on the surface and breathe the air of a complete biosphere it will be a wonderful human moment. It would have to be one of our greatest achievements. On the other hand, the planet that's already there is a sublime, stunning place already, with its own dignity and its own integrity, and presumably its own standing in some kind of spiritual sense. If we change it we're going to ruin a lot of its features. Most of the cliffs will fall if the planet gets hydrated, for example. In essence we'll turn it into a giant park and it will not be Mars anymore. It will be something other than that. We won't have that sense of the otherness and the sheer harsh beauty of Mars as it exists right now. So I feel the red view strongly, but I also think the terraforming project is a very great one."

But there is no doubt in his mind that one day Mars will be colonized. "In fact, if you and I live our full span, I believe we could be around to see it."

I have to say it doesn't look a very likely prospect at the moment. "It sure doesn't, I agree. But the reason I think it's a good possibility is kind of a *realpolitik* thing. Russia and America have two enormous aerospace programmes, and with the Cold War over, there's not a good purpose for either of them.



a lot to go on. The police really are doing the best they can."

"I don't doubt it," said Carmichael.

"I can show you all our lab data – and what's left of the gleanings. You can check it over – take stuff back east with you if you want to, for genetic fingerprinting or whatever. If you can get a result, you're a better man than I am."

"No one doubts your competence, Dr Burke," said Carmichael, "or the enthusiasm of the local police. I'm just here to compile a report. You know how things are."

Burke nodded to indicate that he did, but Carmichael knew it was a lie. Nobody knew how things were – not any more. Things were coming apart at the seams, and you couldn't rely on any of the old routines.

They went back to the jeep and got aboard.

Andrews waited until all his men were loaded into the truck before telling the driver of the jeep to move off. He wanted the vehicles in close conformation while they rode into the town, just in case the road

was booby-trapped and the territory was lousy with enemy agents.

In fact the road was empty, and the surrounding countryside was utterly desolate.

"Did you know Abel and Franklin personally?" Burke asked, after they'd gone a mile or so in silence.

"Not very well," said Carmichael. "I worked in the same building as Abel once, but we were on different projects. I met Franklin at a conference back in '17." He wouldn't have been grieving for the two biotechnologists even if he'd known them better. With thirty million dead in little over six months it was difficult to feel grief for individuals any more. Nor was the project any great loss, from the point of view of the ongoing war effort. It had been a speculative thing, funded in days when priorities were different. That was one reason why the place had been understaffed and underprotected – easy meat for the arsonists.

"I don't think it was local people who did it," said

Illustrations by Kevin Cullen